DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 337 SP 037 220

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TITLE Cultural Moments: A Teaching Strategy for Preparing Teachers for Cultural Diversity.

PUB DATE 97

NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (49th, Phoenix, AZ, February 26-March 1, 1997).

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Clinical Supervision (of Teachers); *Consciousness Raising; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Literacy; *Cultural Pluralism; *Education Courses; Elementary Education; Higher Education; Multicultural Education; Preservice Teacher Education; Reflective Teaching; Student Teaching; Teacher Education Programs; Teaching Methods

IDENTIFIERS Reflective Thinking; Rowan College NJ

ABSTRACT

Students in the Elementary Teacher Education Program at Rowan College (New Jersey) are predominately White and have had little previous contact with minority communities. Reflective classroom activities have been developed to facilitate critical reflection on teaching for diversity and to raise consciousness regarding educational equity. In one such exercise, the "cultural moment," students are asked for reflection about a personal experience of being in a minority status and about an experience that was bicultural, cross-cultural, or intercultural and then to respond to questions about their feelings in these situations, their understanding of the norms and roles of the group, and their own belief system and how it differed from that of the group. Field observations were made of teacher candidates in their student teaching placements (10 in urban schools and 10 in suburban or rural schools) using the Praxis III: Performance Assessment for Beginning Teachers and a pre- and post-observation interview. The education students were found to have experienced many cross-cultural situations in their own lives. Drawing on these, the cultural moments teaching strategy provided a common base for classroom discussions and helped the teacher candidates to recognize and accept individual and group differences. (JLS)

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CULTURAL MOMENTS: A TEACHING STRATEGY FOR PREPARING TEACHERS FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Paper presented at the

American Association of Colleges forTeacher Education

Annual Meeting, Phoenix, Arizona

February 26-March1, 1997

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Cultural Moments-Teaching Strategies for Democratic Participation: Preparing Teachers for Cultural Diversity

Teacher candidates enrolled in today's teacher education programs will be teaching far into the twenty first century. "They must become acquainted with and able to implement a wide range of constructs, interpretations, and pedagogical strategies that will enable them to know the dignity and rights of every individual learner, consonant with the nature of our democracy and pluralistic society" (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1988). Tomorrow's teachers must be prepared to teach children whose socio-cultural backgrounds are different from their own. Most beginning teachers in the early 1990s were ill-prepared to meet this challenge (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). Martin Haberman (1987) questions the seriousness of intent and capability on the part of teacher education programs to meet this need. By the year 2000, almost 40% of all school age children will be members of today's minority group populations (Ogle, 1990). Many of these children will be Asian, Caribbean (non-Spanish speakers), and Hispanic, bringing with them linguistic and cultural heritages different from their teachers (Kellogg, 1988). The teaching force is increasingly becoming more white. It is expected that by the end of this decade, 95% of all teachers will be white and mostly female.

Teacher education programs can no longer address issues of diversity by adding a course or two to their existing curriculum (Haberman, 1987). In their study of culturally responsive teaching, Rodriguez and Sjostrom (1995) found urgency in the need to restructure and revise teacher education preparation programs in order to infuse diversity in both theory and practice. A major question is how can teachers teach what they do not know? Teacher candidates must be

made aware of the cultural capital they possess. The fact is that all people have been culturally marginalized at some moment during their lives and privileged by cultural norms at other moments in their lives. The irony is that although every person is embedded in cultural knowledge and has been socialized in a particular culture, in a specific time and place, we seldom see ourselves as cultural beings. All of us have gender, race, socioeconomic status, religious ideology, age, abilities, geographic location, sexual orientation and ethnicity. The challenge for teacher educators is to raise the level of consciousness about how "culture has informed what we see and understand, as well as what we omit and misconstrue" (Hidalgo, 1993). All the components of culture influence our worldview and how we interpret stimuli and accommodate new learning. Hidalgo suggests that we think about culture as having three levels: the symbolic, the behavioral, and the concrete. She goes on to explain that our values and beliefs lie at the symbolic level. It is at this level that individuals ascribe meaning to their experiences. Life is interpreted according to the values and beliefs one holds. Classroom life is driven by the beliefs and operational theories of the classroom teacher (Putnam & Burke, 1992). Because this level is the most abstract, Hidalgo believes it is the most difficult to articulate. "The behavioral level refers to how we define our social roles, the language(s) we speak, the rituals we practice, and the form taken by our nonverbal communication. Our behavior reflects our values" (p. 100). The concrete level of culture is that which is most visible and tangible. We can see the products of culture: technology, music, foods, and artifacts. " This is what is most often interpreted as 'the culture' of ethnic groups" (p. 101).

Given the present and future demographics of this country and what we know from other disciplines about the influence of culture on learning and development, we need to explore how

teacher educators address multicultural perspectives and preparing teacher candidates to teach for diversity as opposed to teaching to diversity, or worse still, ignoring the issue of diversity altogether. I define teaching to diversity as sporadic attempts to recognize difference in the student population. Some examples are celebrating African American or Women's History months, playing international games, having an ethnic fair in the schools, and so forth. These activities tend to be isolated events and then the teachers return to "the regular program." Their sporadic inclusion throughout the school year, and the linguistic descriptions accompanying them frequently convey the message to the students that these activities are for or about the exotic other and not "the Real Stuff" of learning. I define teaching for diversity as an intellectual, attitudinal, and knowledge preparation for multicultural teaching in a culturally responsive manner. Within this model teacher educators must find ways by which to infuse pluralism and cultural diversity as serious intellectual pursuits. We need mechanisms to raise the consciousness for the students of today who will be the teachers of tomorrow.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The students in the Elementary Teacher Education Program at Rowan College of New Jersey are quite representative of the future teaching force described earlier. They are 99% white women, many first generation to go to college. Most have had superficial, if any interaction with minority communities before entering the program. We are further constrained by credit hour limitations (30 s.h., 12 of which must be student teaching) placed by New Jersey certification regulations and a coordinate liberal arts and science major for all teacher candidates. The route of adding a course or two that addresses diversity is not available to us. The Elementary Teacher Education Program has selected to infuse multicultural perspectives throughout the curriculum.

The challenges we face and continue to address are many. We found that it took us too long a period of time to convince our students that culture influences learning. Even when presented with the research, the long history of low school achievement for minority group students, as well as psychological learning theories and sociological interaction patterns, our teacher candidates intuitively knew something different. Many continued to argue that minority students just needed to try harder. They persisted in their perceptions that multicultural education is only for students of color, urban poor, or linguistic minorities. Those who were open to multicultural education believed it to be another civil rights issue. Most students resisted attempts to explore cognitively and critically reflect on the influences of cultural factors on student learning. Stereotypes and institutionalized racism patterns are very difficult to examine, deconstruct, and address in one or two course periods. Our teacher education program has as a goal that our students incorporate social justice as a function of schooling. Most of them also come to believe that it is the teacher's responsibility to address equity in her/his planning, instruction, and evaluation. Notwithstanding, we needed to find a more emotionally cost-effective and time-efficient manner in which to describe and model teaching for diversity.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to explore and test pedagogical strategies by which our students address how cultural perspectives influence one's work in the classroom? Recent research on educational equity and teaching practice has provided evidence that autobiographical learning experiences examined through critical reflection enhance the teacher's understanding of the teaching/learning process (Brookfield, 1995). We knew that many meaningful insights would come from critical reflection and that these insights could multiply for each student and

cumulatively for the entire class if we each shared our personal insights and experiences. We also knew our students were bright , well intentioned, and enthusiastic future educators. However, we knew that some aspects of culture are so ingrained and internalized that serious introspection would be required to deconstruct and examine how one's own cultural experiences have influenced one's attitudes, operational theories, and interpersonal behavior. It is our intent that this realization about themselves would then transfer to the students they were teaching in practicum, student teaching, and in their future classrooms.

Preparing college students to enter the teaching profession in the 21st century requires that they examine their conceptualization of cultural influences on learning. In this study, the researchers identify and document the effectiveness of selected instructional strategies for facilitating critical reflection and an orientation towards teaching for diversity.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The Reflective Exercise. The researchers have developed reflective classroom activities which raise consciousness surrounding educational equity. The activities developed are reflection exercises. This study focusses on one such exercise, "cultural moments". The students are given a task that they complete by themselves. These are assignments that they must do alone, which differ from most of their in and out of class work which is completed in collaboration with others. The main task is titled "Cultural Moments." The students are given an activity sheet which asks that based on their experiences, they give some examples of a "cultural moment." If you have not experienced one, give a classroom activity that might result in one. There are two components. The first asks about a moment when you experienced being the single representative of a particular category. For example, you were the only women among men

(gender category), the only Jewish person among Christians (religious category), the only one of your socio-economic status (class category), and so forth. The second asks about an experience that was bicultural, cross-cultural, or intercultural. For example, you lived with a French family while on a student abroad exchange program or you lived or worked in an intercultural environment. After the teacher candidates identify one life experience in each category, they answer the following questions: 1) How do you remember feeling?; 2) Did you understand the norms, gender roles, parameters on time, and socio-political expectations for common behavior?; 3) What was your reaction to your belief system and how did it compare with or contrast to the beliefs of the others in the cultural experience? On the due date, the students bring their written papers to class and share them with each other. First, they are placed in teams of 4 students to a group. This allows everyone to share her/his story and to ask questions of one another. Then, we assemble as the whole class and students are asked to volunteer to share what they learned from the experience. Lastly, the written "cultural moments" were collected for content analysis.

Content Analysis. A content analysis was conducted by both researchers. The analysis focussed on the extent to which the strategies utilized (including the field based component) helped students form concepts that approximate the concepts of experts in the field of culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education. We defined concepts as the models, hypotheses, impressions, and other mental images of phenomena, all of which constitute an important part of the academic subject of educational equity and teaching for diversity.

We further sought evidence of learning community (as presented in the Elementary Education Program and especially in Educational Studies IV course) in their written and oral

statements. We then looked for evidence of the socialization of students into the values and norms of collaborative, pluralistic, cooperative, reflective decision-makers and civic actors. Next, we looked for evidence of knowledge of subject matter and evidence that the students have internalized a sense of community. These learning strategies would add to the creation of a learning community in both the college and elementary classroom, a community that draws on the norms of scholarship from the academic subject and the norms of collegiality and participation from the participants' culture. We looked for content that is relevant and meaningful to diverse learners. If students do not perceive the concepts, content, and process meaningful to their own lives, they will not strive to master it. It was hoped that the content analysis would reveal that the students developed a meaningful, reflective process by which they could analyze their teaching for diversity.

Field Observations. Twenty teacher candidates were selected for field observations in their student teaching placements. Ten teacher candidates teaching in urban school districts and ten teacher candidates teaching in suburban or rural school districts were observed in their school placements to document evidence of culturally responsive teaching. The Praxis III: Performance Assessment for Beginning Teachers was used for field observations. This instrument had been tested for its ability to document teaching strategies that are culturally responsive (Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 1995).

Pre and Post Observation Interviews. A pre and post interview protocol were used before and after each lesson observed. Although both researchers conducted these interviews, a separate content analysis was conducted by each to insure validity and reliability.

FINDINGS

What resulted was an eye opener. The students were eager to share their personal experiences both in the writing of their task assignment and in the college classroom discussion of the "Cultural Moment." They couldn't wait to talk. They asked others whom they heard in their small group to share their story with the whole class. It was truly an "aha" learning experience. Everyone, without exception, said how much insight he/she gained from this personal reflection.

Examples of some of the experiences shared included: being the only women on a construction crew; the only white couple at a wedding of African Americans; the only Jewish employee at a company Christmas party; the nanny at a fancy upscale pool party; the only white female on a bus trip; the only Black man at an all white Baptist church service; a Christian marrying into a Jewish family; a monolingual English speaker growing up in a bilingual neighborhood; attending an interdenominational Martin Luther King service; an American women being transferred to Iraq for six months; and a white male being a victim of corporate down-sizing and having to go on welfare after being in middle management for 18 years. The opportunity to examine and rethink their own cultural moments and to hear the stories of their peers helped articulate the sense of "Other" for these teacher candidates. This pedagogical strategy affirmed for them the knowledge that they are cultural beings who have experienced cultural marginalization and acculturation. This activity helps to raise consciousness abut the fact that in many of today's classrooms, they will be the minority person. It also illustrated how their worldview has influenced how they perceive and interpret life experiences. After reflecting on

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autobiographical experiences, they quickly saw the disparities and felt the differential treatment.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

This "cultural moments" teaching strategy provides a common base for classroom discussions. It serves as a trust building experience and an ice-breaker for exploring diversity issues. The ensuing critical reflection contributes to the development of the teacher candidates' understanding of **their** belief system which surrounds cultural experiences. It also contributes to honest reflection that helps each individual and the class as a whole to construct a pedagogical moment which they can analyze, share and put within the context of their preparation as teachers. The "cultural moments" activity also helps teacher candidates scaffold their understanding and belief in the number and complexity of cultural norms and experiences present among the students in their classrooms.

One of the major contributions of this type of activity is that it encourages a willingness on the part of teacher candidates to entertain individual and group differences among the learners. It also provides a basis for credibility for teaching and learning about the cultures of the classroom and for teaching in a culturally responsive manner. This, in and of itself, helps teacher candidates to expand their intellectual curiosity about their students and how they experience multiple cultural contexts. This is particularly important since teachers deal with situations in which cultural contexts influence what students know and how they learn every minute of the day in classrooms across the nation. Awareness is the first step in teaching for diversity. Once teacher candidates are open to teaching to diversity, they can engage in the next step which is learning to implement a culturally responsive pedagogy.

Understanding the influence of culture by revisiting and critically examining cultural

moments encourages teacher candidates to focus on the processes, inputs, and outcomes of classroom interaction in order to be able to create a more equitable learning environment. These shared experiences help shift the classroom focus from teaching to learning; from isolated happenings to networking collaboratively for culturally connected learning. The "cultural moments" activity aids future teachers in developing professional efficacy concerning their ability to teach diverse student populations and the belief in students' ability to learn from their instruction. This sharing of stories places each teacher candidate in a risk-like situation. Their risking of personal revelations serves as trust building in the college classroom and lays the foundations for efficacy, caring, creating safe and open environments in their future public school classrooms. It also lowers the anxiety about teaching culturally diverse students. They come to a realization through listening to theirs and others' stories that everyone has cultural assumptions, theories, expectations, and behaviors. They further realize that as teachers they need to examine which ones they hold. This "cultural moments" teaching strategy emphasizes that culture is a social construct and as future teachers they need to pay attention to creating new learning settings and paradigms in order to reach those students who may be out of the norm as they know it. This critical thinking task models educators as inquiring professionals. It is an opportunity to facilitate knowledge acquisition and model classroom strategies and structures that are relevant issues of diversity in their professional preparation programs.

In order to teach in a culturally responsive manner, teachers need to depart from a pluralistic mode which views difference as enrichment rather than a deficit mode which views difference as something to be fixed or altered. The "cultural moments" activity provides a space for validating teacher candidates' and ultimately, children's cultural experiences in analyzing how

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culture influences what all of us know and how we come to know. From this position, we can move into how cultural experiences, norms, procedures, rules, and roles come into play in the classroom. It is a commonly held belief that culture influences our understanding of the world. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers be prepared to understand, appreciate and validate the cultural experiences of all learners in their classrooms.

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